

Computers and the EFL Class: Their Advantages and a Possible Outcome, the Autonomous Learner

By Benicio Galavis

There has been a lot of talk about the use of computers for EFL/ESL teaching and learning recently. On the one hand, we often hear or read on the pages of EFL/ESL teaching journals statements and questions like: EFL teachers are not always compatible with computers. Teachers and students alike suffer computer phobia. Should we have a computer per classroom or a computer lab? Are computers effective? On the other hand, some authors (Davidson and Tomic 1994; Reis 1995; Sivert and Egbert 1995) have already reported satisfaction of their teaching needs by using computers, computer networks, the Internet, computer software, and multimedia computers or systems.

The objective of this article is to report the gains that may be obtained from the use of computers to develop language skills in students of English as a foreign language. First, presented are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of computers in EFL/ESL. A set of guidelines for the use of computers in the teaching and learning of English is also suggested. Finally, two related issues which are an almost natural outcome of the use of computers in EFL/ESL are discussed: the role of the teacher in a computer enhanced class and autonomous learners.

The Computer: A Useful Tool

Reports in journals (Sivert and Egbert 1995; Taylor 1995) show that computers, multimedia systems, and even multimedia labs for the teaching and learning of English are already being used throughout the world. Venezuela is not an exception. There are several of these centers here in Caracas, and I have had the opportunity of observing and contributing, as a teacher and researcher, to one center's functionality. This is a very modern multimedia language center where high-tech resources are available for students. It represents the backbone of an English program whose main goal is to teach and encourage participants to become autonomous learners. Students, or participants as we like to call them, have a modern, well equipped center where they can go and use VCRs, cable TV, and computers equipped with CD-ROM, and e-mail and Internet access. Participants spend a reasonable amount of time working on listening comprehension with videos and cable TV, and executing writing, grammar, and pronunciation exercises with the computers. They also have a weekly two-hour session with a teacher. This program requires a teacher who is more a guide than a lecturer; it requires a teacher who gives students the strategies they need for working on their own. I have had the opportunity of observing some of the issues that arise when working with this kind of program and with these technological resources.

The Multimedia System used for the program makes use of video, pictures, sound, and the possibility of recording and reproducing learners' voices. The various components in this system may be attached to each other to produce, enhance, or extend their interactivity. It may sound as if there is overwhelming high-tech equipment that not everybody knows how to use, or has, but the truth is that most of the equipment mentioned above is really very common in everyday life. Just like TV, the readily observable peculiarity of the use of multimedia systems is that they "attack" two senses at the same time: *sight* and *hearing*. This characteristic makes multimedia systems a crucial resource when working with autonomous learners. The use of all or part of this equipment may represent an advantage for the improvement of the teaching- learning environment. Some of the advantages and disadvantages are presented in the following table.

As well as there are advantages, disadvantages may also be found, and they have to be taken into account when we plan to work with computer or technology enhanced environments. Some of the disadvantages observed when working with computers in EFL are presented above. Some students and teachers are discouraged by computers.

In order to really understand what computers can do for our EFL/ESL contexts and take advantage of the benefits they may bring, we have to actually use them and view them from an insightful, creative, and innovative angle. First, we have to ask ourselves a series of questions that will help us visualize our "technologically enhanced" work environment and procedures. Some of the questions we should ask ourselves are the following:

- What and how will we design, implement and teach in a course using multimedia systems?
- When will we use the system? Everyday? Throughout a whole class? With a fixed or flexible schedule?
- Where will we have such a system? In a lab? In a special place different from a lab? What will this place be like?
- Who will attend the classes or sessions with this system? Will they be young learners, adult learners, autonomous learners assisted by an instructor, beginners, intermediate or advanced students?
- What learning context will the system be used for? An EFL context? ESL context? ESP? EAP?

The answers to these questions may help us decide whether or not the use of computers for our needs or resources is practical and feasible. Answers to the questions may be the basis for deciding the adequate or appropriate use of the system for our program. The answers may even lead to a novel idea of how to use this kind of system to effectively enhance the teaching- learning process and environment we have been working with for a long time.

Guidelines for the Use of Computers in the EFL/ESL Contexts

The following is a set of guidelines to help you through the process of getting used to computer enhanced classes, in case you decide to use computers for your EFL/ESL needs.

- Remember that computers and other equipment are just tools, and you have to make them work for you, not against you.
- Do not feel satisfied with the materials that commercial software may provide; create your own materials. These can be based on the software.
- Motivate students by using computer games for which you have prepared classwork materials.
- Create materials for work with the computer which are also related to the teacher-led sessions.
- Make schedules flexible enough as to accommodate individual or small group sessions with the computer.
- Think of the combination of teacher-led classes and computer sessions that best suit your needs.
- Design your own computer oriented tasks for the development of language skills.
- Direct students to the objectives you want them to achieve (these may not necessarily be the same objectives of the software program).
- Use Internet accessibility and create writing and speaking tasks for your students using this computer resource.
- The World Wide Web contains millions of pages you can use to produce reading tasks. Use it to help encourage your EFL students to learn about a wide variety of cultures and topics.
- You may also design reading tasks using any CD-ROM encyclopedia or program that contains hypertext.
- Encourage your students to use their intellectual potential by assigning them computer tasks such as looking for information in databases, that will make them think and use English.
- Encourage them to use word processors and their applications such as spelling and grammar checkers.
- In order to give a sense of purpose to what your students are going to write, have them write and send real e-mail and faxes: this will provide them with a real sense of communication.
- Make use of web pages or CD interactive programs to generate discussions. Topics can be as varied as your and your students' imagination can get, and as interesting as your searches through the Internet are.

What are the Gains Teachers May Glean from the Use of Computers?

Good as all this sounds, accessibility may be a major problem with the use of this kind of system. Unless we have a complete lab with several computers, only a small group of maybe three or four students can work with a computer at the same time. This is more often than not less than ideal. If we have large groups of students, at least three or four computers will be needed. If the budget is limited and there are too many students for four computers, what can you do? Design courses that are flexible enough to accommodate students' schedules to a part-time autonomous-learner framework.

Without eliminating or reducing teacher's classes drastically, students can be scheduled to attend individual work sessions with the multimedia system throughout the week. This may require designing tasks that can be carried out by students without much assistance from the teacher. The student worksheets have to be designed in a way that will allow students to work individually and monitor themselves. Answers to questions or corrections to exercises can be made readily available so that students check their own production easily.

One possible schedule for this autonomous work on the computer can be summarized this way: a) students attend multimedia sessions outside classroom hours, b) they work on their own, c) they monitor and evaluate themselves, d) they check their production with an answer key or with the teacher. These steps obviously require a learner who is disciplined and who will take complete advantage of the learning process by combining what has been taught in classroom sessions with the multimedia-system sessions.

When a motivating resource such as a multimedia system is used, the benefit of autonomous work may be magnified. The role of the teacher will be different from that of a simple holder and provider of knowledge; the teacher will become the students' guide. Will computers take over the teacher's role? No. In fact, once teachers stop seeing computers as a threat and their uneasiness ceases (and Reis, 1995, reports that it actually does) they will be able to use their creativity to produce new materials. They will also be able to redirect their efforts to weak areas. Teachers will continue to develop the real life communication which computers can- not provide. If teachers get to understand computers and really become computer literate, they will gain instead of lose and they will become more efficient and productive teachers.

Conclusions

One of the objectives of this article was to show some of the benefits of using computers in EFL/ESL. The benefits are better perceived when you actually use computers than when you read about them. The list of benefits, the guidelines, and the experience reported here are meant to encourage you to use computers for your EFL/ ESL classes or programs. The worst disadvantage does not come from using computers, but from not trying to incorporate them into our programs. The media have assisted self-access learning to grow faster than our traditional classroom methods, but self-access alone fails to achieve all the goals. By incorporating technology in your programs, you will see many more benefits than the few mentioned in this article. The disadvantages listed here and the ones you may find when working with computers will never outweigh the improvement you will notice in your English programs. One of the greatest improvements is that you can produce autonomous learners who are able to control at least part of their learning process. You will find more time with new resources to create new ideas, procedures, and materials for your classes.

Advantages of the use of computers

The used computers motivate students to learn. Videos, pictures, and sound presented by computers stimulate sight and hearing simultaneously in a way traditional resources do not. Computers can help train students to become more independent learners. Using computers to

learn English can help learners to become more disciplined. The computer can bring support to the learning strategies acquired by students. Teachers' responsibilities include giving students the strategies they need for working on their own. Computers with CD-ROM may provide considerable input and a wide variety of registers and accents. The input computers can provide may facilitate the formulation of ideas. Computers provide access to authentic materials and audiences around the world through the Internet. A computer enhanced environment may encourage language acquisition.

Disadvantages of the use of computers

Some students and teachers are discouraged by computers. Many students and teachers reject a change from the traditional classes. It is very difficult for some students to get used to being independent learners. Undisciplined students have problems working with computers. Computers do not provide some important features of real communicative exchanges. Computers are machines and they need maintenance, something which may require interruptions to class or study time. Computers do not provide the sense of cooperation that can be found in a class with a teacher.

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